IMITATIONS-TRANSFORMATIONS: BIRDS OF PARADISE IN PERFORMANCE FROM THE CENTRAL PROVINCES OF PAPUA NEW GUINEA

George Athanasopoulos
Aristotle University of Thessaloniki
georgenathanasopoulos@gmail.com

1. EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Could singing and courtship displays of birds be considered music and dance? If so, could they provide the basis for ritualized human behaviour aiming at social cohesion and bonding? Birdsong has inspired western composers in the past, and was noted down using WSN up until the middle of the 20th century, implying inspired by the perception of inherent music-like qualities (Mundy, 2009), such as rhythm, melody, repetition and variation. Few in the western world today would call birdsong music, however, as it lacks human creativity and meaning (Titon, 2015). The fact that the imitation of birdsong and bird courtship display acquires meaning as coordinated musico-ritual activity in performance for many tribes inhabiting the mountainous grasslands of central Papua New Guinea is unfortunately often ignored. These activities often aim at strengthening social organization and group cohesion (Patel, 2010), and on occasion is thought to possess metaphysical properties (Feld, 1982). Furthermore, movement to music, and the activity of making music in collaboration with others, is considered a key component of activities which are central to ritual, courtship, identity, and human expression across the majority of human cultures.

The aim of this paper is to present a sampling of ritual "bird-song" performances from the Huli, Melpa, Enga, Bena-Bena and Abau tribes of Papua New Guinea, and to compare them to the actual birdsongs and courtship displays (where applicable) from which they yield their inspiration. This juxtaposition involves comparison between birdsong and bird movements with human music activity and dance.

As this ethnomusicological analysis of songs and dances imitating local bird fauna runs parallel with sonic information recorded in nature, this juxtaposition is carried out through sonogram and frequency analysis of song performances using Audacity and through audio data captured during fieldwork in 2010 in Goroka and Mt. Hagen. Audacity is a free open source digital audio editor and recording computer software application which was considered as an appropriate tool for its easiness of use in the field by a non-expert in sound editing and processing. Additionally, the Raven Interactive Sound Analysis Software is also deployed in further analysis of the sound data as it specializes in birdsong.

Synchronizing movements in performance, a common element in Papua New Guinean "bird imitation" dances, is thought to "merge" an individual's self with others, via neural pathways that code for both action and perception (Overy and Molnar-Szakacs, 2009). Though the short sample size does not permit broader assumptions through observation, it is possible to yield interesting results regarding this organized display of social behaviour in ritual song/dance performance in Papua New Guinea. It has to be stressed however, that, as this correlational exploratory research study focused on participant performance activities occurring in natural context, it was only through interviews and bibliographic research that the actual causes of such behaviours were determined.

The results of this study forces us to reconsider the nature of "bird imitation" dances not as mere mimicry of nature, as Allen and Dawe rightly observe (2015), but as a form of a collective group activity, pervading through the history of music as a social interaction among our species (Nettl, 2000; 2010).

Keywords: *ecomusicology; ethnomusicology; Papua New Guinea; bird-of-paradise; performance ritual.*

2. REFERENCES

Allen, A. S., & Dawe, K. (Eds.). (2015). *Current Directions in Ecomusicology: Music, Culture, Nature*. Routledge.

Feld, S. (2012/1982). *Sound and Sentiment: Birds, Weeping, Poetics, and Song in Kaluli Expression, with a new introduction by the author*. Duke University Press.

Mundy, R. (2009). Birdsong and the Image of Evolution. *Society & Animals*, *17*(3), 206-223.

Nettl B. (2000). "An ethnomusicologist contemplates universals in musical sound and musical culture," in *The Origins of Music*, eds Wallin N. L., Merker B., Brown S., editors. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press;) 463–472

Nettl, B. (2010). *The study of ethnomusicology: Thirty-one issues and concepts*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.

Overy, K., & Molnar-Szakacs, I. (2009). Being together in time: musical experience and the mirror neuron system. *Music Percept.* 26, 489–504. doi: 10.1525/mp.2009.26.5.489

Patel, A. D. (2010). *Music, language, and the brain*. Oxford university press.

Tarr B, Launay J & Dunbar RIM (2014) Music and social bonding: "self-other" merging and neurohormonal mechanisms. *Front. Psychol.* **5**:1096. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2014.01096

Titon, J. T. (2015). *Worlds of Music: An Introduction to the Music of the World s Peoples*. Nelson Education.